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ABSTRACT

The liberal education of teachers is based on two types of knowledge: a professional training in education and methodology, and the academic knowledge upon which specific teaching skills are built. This second type develops perception, interpretation, application, and verbal and nonverbal skills. Liberally educated teachers can understand and teach the connections between and the integration of skills in the classroom, reducing the possibility of "fragmentary learning" (or the acquisition, but not integration, of skills). Because their liberal arts background provides them with the ability to adjust to student needs and curriculum changes without yielding the major educational goal, liberally educated teachers are equipped to make decisions, plan programs, and coordinate activities that bring about the most effective learning atmosphere possible. (CJ)

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LIBERALLY EDUCATED TEACHERS: THE POTENTIAL
FOR REDUCING EDUCATIONAL FRAGMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Liberal education of preservice teachers holds potential for preparing educators who expect and seek connections between ideas and events. In the classroom, expectation of connectedness may assist teachers to avoid artificial compartmentalization of curriculum areas and/or viewing children's learning from solely the cognitive perspective.

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Liberally Educated Teachers: The Potential
For Reducing Educational Fragmentation

One of my responsibilities at the university where I am employed is to teach a developmental reading methods course to preservice elementary education students. During the course, I stress that children must master a number of subskills to achieve fluent reading ability. This emphasis is frequently laced with statements such as "But reading doesn't actually occur unless children can integrate whatever subskills they possess into the act of 'real reading,'" Reading is not simply a collection of skills; it is a complex, integrative process.

Teaching is also a complex integrative process. Hence, any preservice program which increases the likelihood of preservice candidates fitting together the bits and pieces of instruction into the integrative act of teaching is worthy of serious consideration. Would liberal education enhance the probability of students achieving this integration of thought and action in the classroom? The following discussion centers on the potential of liberal education as a vehicle to assist teacher candidates to internalize the process of connecting ideas and events to each other.

While it is difficult to describe the preparation of a liberally educated teacher in terms of a specific course of study to be pursued at a university, it is safe to assume that such an education would provide more than a surface acquaintance with several areas of knowledge. Further, the potential teacher would probably select a focal point (a major field) to which and from which he would try to relate

knowledge from several disciplines.

The candidate would strive to establish a base of academic knowledge upon which to build specific teaching skills. Methodology alone would not serve as a focal point. Methodology is a process variable employed to achieve a product: children's learning. However, a process variable assumes the presence of a presage variable. That is to say, a body of understandings must exist upon which to develop and conduct the methodology of teaching. Smith, Goodman and Meredith (1976) cautioned teacher evaluators against over reliance on exhibitions of technical teaching skills to assess teacher competence:

Performance in teaching may indicate competence, or it may not indicate anything more than habit--unexamined techniques that the teacher has always used or seen other teachers use.... A performance of discrete acts of teaching cannot account for the total act that involves an integrated series of thought-value judgments brought to insightful application in style and content. The competent teacher formulates and applies conceptual-valuative schemes (ideational structures) derived from both professional and academic knowledge at the same time.... Professional and academic thought, value, and attitude cannot be separated in the reality of teaching (pp. 415-16).

While the reality of teaching makes a separation between knowledge and skills difficult, it is possible to conceptually distinguish knowledge from skills. Further, some skills can be observed.

The liberally educated teacher should, as much as any teacher, exhibit the pedagogical skills which can be identified and publicly assessed. In addition, however, the liberally educated teacher possesses a background of academic knowledge which provides the teacher with more options to draw upon when he/she constructs the environment within which the pupil-teacher interaction takes place.

By virtue of knowledge from several disciplines, the liberally educated teacher is disposed to perceive connections between apparently unrelated phenomena. This expectation of perceiving the interrelatedness of the areas of knowledge serves to alert the teacher to the narrowness of viewing children's learning as occurring within isolated compartments. The expectation of connectedness makes it possible for the teacher to deliberately plan classroom experiences which highlight for children the relationships among the conventionally defined areas of the curriculum.

The teacher's planning skills involve decision making about such matters as the establishment of priorities for instructional objectives and the selection of appropriate learning activities. Such decision making requires professional knowledge and skills. The liberally educated teacher can bring to these decision making points areas of academic knowledge which enable him/her to entertain a wide vision as the teacher selects ways to implement objectives. He/she can help children understand, for example, that the ingredients and methods of cooking utilized by a cultural group reflect geographic location, climate, religious beliefs and a host of other factors.

Thus, cooking may be an appropriate activity for fostering children's understanding of several concepts frequently identified in a curriculum guide for the social studies. The use of cooking as a vehicle for developing social studies concepts is an instructional option not likely to be so apparent to a teacher whose professional preparation did not extend beyond a course of study largely devoted to the methodology of teaching basic school subjects.

Further, the liberally educated teacher is comfortable with modes of communication humans have devised which include both lingual and non-lingual presentations. This comfort grows out of a conviction regarding the essentiality of children's contact with varied modes of literacy. As Smith, Goodman and Meredith stated:

Rather than pursuing the vague concept of appreciation, the arts in the curriculum should fill the need for literacy in these particular modes of presentation. In a real sense, children need to learn how to present their ideas in art forms and how to "read" the symbolic presentation of others. Practice in the arts should be contiguous with practice in language presentation. The study of art, music, dance and theater is not a frill but is an essential in the curriculum (p. 120).

The liberally educated teacher does not view the development of nonlingual forms of literacy as "add ons" to an already crowded curriculum. Instead, he/she views the arts as an integral part of the study of language, mathematics, science and the social studies.

The teacher can accept and pursue the connectedness of man's areas of knowledge and constantly strive to confront children with this connectedness.

The teacher's liberal education background also shields him/her from viewing children as one dimensional, cognitive creatures. An expectation of connectedness prepares the teacher for the reality of children's responding to events as a complex of cognitive, affective and physical factors. Further, recognition of the complexity of human behavior assists the teacher in working constructively within the social system of the school where many specialists function alongside the classroom teacher.

An acquaintance with several areas of knowledge prepares the teacher to respond positively to the specialized knowledge and skills of such people as psychometrists, reading diagnosticians, music teachers and special education personnel. The liberally educated teacher can recognize that the specialized competencies of some of his/her professional peers are not aimed at intimidating the generalist. On the contrary, the generalist is best equipped to serve as the agent who seeks to integrate specialized insights regarding children into a wholeness of response possible within the classroom. By the nature of his/her preservice preparation, the liberally educated teacher is uncomfortable with fragmentary knowledge; an expectation of the connectedness of knowledge extends to his/her interpretation of data from specialists as he/she plans and implements learning activities for children.

The liberally educated teacher also feels comfortable with the

premise that solid theory ultimately may be the most practical information he/she may utilize in the classroom. The teacher's background enables him/her to view teaching as intellectually demanding as well as a behavioral process. He/she does not view instruction as a bag of tricks in which one rummages about in order to pull out a method for the day. On the contrary, the teacher can recognize that the uniqueness of his/her personality, the physical setting within which he/she functions and the children whom he/she teaches obviate mechanistic responses. The teacher must seek structure at the cognitive level and draw upon these theoretical constructs to determine appropriate operational tactics. Gibson and Levin (1976) addressed this concern for theory in their discussion of the purpose governing the preparation of their text about the psychology of reading:

...advice about instruction or comparison of programs, or prescriptions about what to do with retarded readers, cannot take the place of giving the potential teacher the intellectual tools to think for himself when problems arise. There is no such thing as a pedagogical panacea. Problems will arise, new ones, because children are different and environments are different. The teacher must be able to accommodate to them independently by providing the environment and the materials that the child's particular needs demand. We believe that we can be most helpful

to teachers and others concerned with the teaching of reading by giving them insights into the process of reading rather than dogma. The aim [of this text] is to help them solve problems, not to provide a cookbook approach. In line with this aim, we shall favor rather than eschew theory, for as a great educator once said, there is nothing so practical as a good theory (p. 10).

Particularly in the current social context where there is demand for accountability for the outcomes of educational endeavor, faith in the relevance of theory to practice is needed. Necessary, too, is the psychological strength to maintain that belief under pressures directed at teachers.

In this regard, the liberally educated teacher may be in a somewhat stronger position to offset the potential negative impact of the trend towards the minimal competency testing of students. Harvey and Madaus (1978) concluded:

Competency-testing schemes may have important unintended consequences, both for students and for the substance of what gets taught in school. The most sensible antidote to such side effects is to devote more attention to what should be taught in the schools and how to teach it effectively and less to that which can conveniently be measured. For the maximum of what currently can be measured, especially using

paper and pencil competency tests, should not

define the minimum of what is taught or learned (p. 481).

The liberally educated teacher should not feel uncomfortable about devoting "more attention to what should be taught." Philosophical examination of the goals of education should be an activity germane to an individual who has been liberally educated.

There is great need today for liberally educated teachers in the schools. The complex of pressures emanating from financial constraints, reductive views of educational goals, and unfounded expectations concerning the present capabilities of psychometrics requires teachers whose intellectual habits prepare them to react creatively to such pressures. If accountability represents the latest fad in American education, then the outcomes are likely to dampen present enthusiasm as the shortcomings of operating educational institutions without the structure of a clearly articulated and honest philosophy becomes evident. Indeed, a resurgence of concern for liberal education is likely to occur. In the meantime, the schools are in need of teachers who can adapt to the pressures of the moment without relinquishing a wider vision.

The liberally educated teacher can and should achieve the professional knowledge and skills identified with education as an applied discipline. In addition, he/she can bring to the profession the academic knowledge and habits of thought fostered by a liberal education. A marriage of these academic and professional understandings and skills may result in a happy issue: educators who can construct and communicate

to students an ecology of knowledge and skills within a classroom environment where fragmentation of educational experience is at least reduced if not eliminated.

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